

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN SOUTH ARCOT DISTRICT (c.1750-1947)

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India has a rich cultural heritage, and the art of hand weaving formed part of it. Besides the arts of hand-spinning, hand dying and hand printing, hand weaving had also been perfected by the Indian artisans in ancient times.¹ During the Chola and Vijayanagar period the weavers located around the temple and wove the cloth for the development of temple economy.² The rise of the Vijayanagar empire was a massive southward migration of Telugu-speaking people under the auspices of the Vajayanagar State. These migrations established a series of Nayaka Kingdoms in the plains of the Tamil country, which produced an economic boom in the dry areas of this region. Senji was undertaken under the auspices of the Senji Nayaka.³ Earlier, this industry was not based on caste system, but in course of time it developed on caste basis. Handloom industry occupied an important place in the rural economy of Tamil country. The industry engaged largest number of workers, next only to agriculture. The industry provides employment directly and indirectly to thousands of people. The industry has passed through several vicissitudes in its age-long history. It had been the intrinsic vitality to survive and as such, it occupies a place of prominence in the colonial economy. In this region of artistic fabrics, handloom had an unrivalled position. Quality, design and grade of handloom fabrics differ from one another. This qualitative edge of handloom fabrics provides strength to the industry to carry on production.

Another factor, favourable for handloom was that belief that, hand woven cloth was more durable and therefore, cheaper in the long run. This belief attracts poor people to purchase handloom cloth in preference to mill-made cloth. Further, capital costs and running expenses for the weavers were small. In other words, handloom weaving required less capital investment. Above all, it was a house hold industry and all members of the family work together for their livelihood.⁴

Various European powers interested in the extraction of these items for export started their settlements at Cuddalore as early as the 16th century. The Portuguese appointed Damiao Paes as the Captain of the harbour in 1584 who rebuilt the port with the approval of the Nayak of Senji.⁵ After entered the European company into this country, the handloom section plays a very important role in the Company's economy.

Weavers and their settlement in South Arcot

The Portuguese writer of the 16th century mentioned Cuddalore as an important weaving centre.⁶ Some of the centres of textile production which centred to European requirements at South Arcot were: Olakkur and Kunimedu in Tindivanam taluk, Tirupalapenthal and Tiruchchupuram in Cuddalore taluk, Nerkunam, Tiruvannainallur, Tiruvakkai, Villupuram and Villianur in Villupuram taluk, Singavaram in Senji taluk, Chengam in Tiruvannamalai taluk, Srimushnam in Chidambaram taluk.⁷ In these taluks, where it was concentrated, spinning must have contributed a great deal too total household incomes, especially for poor cultivators. In addition, spinning played an important economic role as insurance in the dry areas. Many women must have

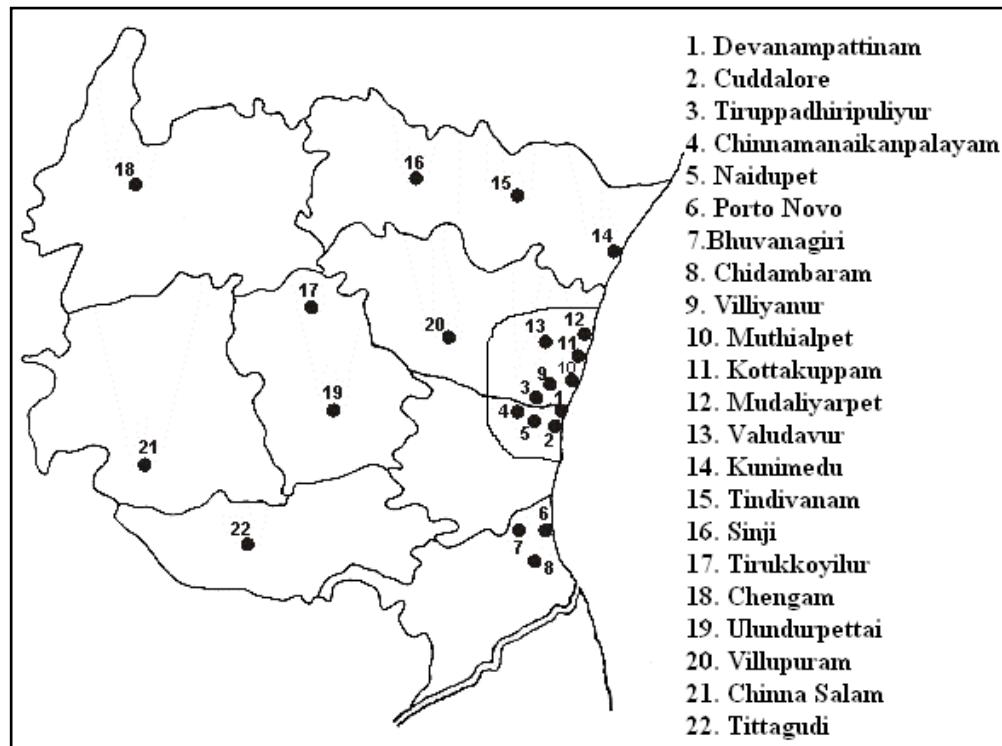
supported their families with their spinning, which was work that was to be had as long as cotton was available.⁸

The major source for the social and economic history of the period, deals largely with the Companies' external trade and their commercial activities in South India. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sources are supplemented wherever possible with material from later centuries. Much of the materials on merchants and weavers in the English East India Company records pertain to weaving villages that supplied cloth to the Company at Madras and Fort St. David at Cuddalore.⁹ This material, which was drawn from a large number of villages dispersed over a wide area of the Tamil Nadu, indicates that the relation between merchants and weavers throughout the area were broadly similar. The majority of the cotton weavers in South Arcot were professional weavers; that is, work at the loom represented their sole source of earnings. However, a small number of Tamil and Telugu weavers took up weaving in order to supplement earnings from other pursuits.¹⁰ Their small numbers suggest that they accounted for only a small fraction of total cloth production. Many were primarily agriculturalists who followed weaving seasonally. These weavers, being of low skill, tended to produce coarser varieties of cloth. This production supplied the needs of the weaver and his family as well as outside customer who by and large tended to be located in the immediate vicinity of the weaver.

According to Arasaratnam, Tindivanam was a centre of some weaving activity and was a market for the sale of goods. The biggest concentration of weaving centres in this district was in the Cuddalore and Chidambaram. Two large weaving villages that supplied goods to Cuddalore were Chinnappanayakanpalayam and Naduvirapattu

(Naidupet). Some of these were clustered round the port of Pondicherry in the villages of Mudaliyarpet, Valudavur, Kottakkuppam and Muthialpet.¹¹ These centres were closely connected with Cuddalore (see map). In the late 18th and 19th centuries the numbers of weaving villages were reduced, because the weavers were turned their professional. A few miles interior from Cuddalore, indigo was grown in sufficient quantities to be exported after the local demands of painting and dyeing were met. In the 18th century, textiles produced in Bangalore were sent to Cuddalore for dyeing.¹²

Major weaving and textile centres in the 17th and 18th centuries



The majority of these full-time weavers were drawn from the four main weaving castes in South Arcot, the Kaikolars, the saliyar, sedars, and devanga. Besides, the weavers of Senguntha Mudaliyars, the Gounders, Padayachi and the Muslims were involved in this as part-time professional.¹³ In eighteenth century large group of weavers existed in South

Arcot, especially in Cuddalore taluk. The head merchants suggested ways and means of settling weavers at various localities of Cuddalore and Devanampattinam in order to reduce their difficulty and unnecessary delay in procuring the cotton goods. They expressed their desire to bring as many weavers as possible into the limits of Cuddalore. They also made a subscription of two thousand pagodas. They said that they could build four hundred houses out of the amount collected. Accordingly they prayed for permission from the Deputy Governor for accommodating the weavers.¹⁴ In many cases they had plots of land. Three types of taxes were collected from the inhabitants of Chinnapanaiakanpalayam, Naidupet and Cuddalore bounds. These were: (a) the 'Juncan', an excise duty on all sorts of commodities, (b) a loom-tax which was levied on every single loom, supposedly for protection and (c) a tax on grain-lands. The Cuddalore Council repeatedly pointed out that the first two types of taxes affected the investment but the third did not.¹⁵ The Company did not directly assume the duty of maintaining law and order in these places. There were a head-watchman at Chinnapanaiakanpalayam, and a *polligar* each at Naidupet and at the Bounds. These people naturally took a substantial share of the taxes;¹⁶ the rest went to the Company. The Cuddalore Council also referred to demands by the 'Circar officials' which the inhabitants of the *Jagir* villages had to meet. The basis and the extent of these demands cannot be determined.

About one-third of the merchant advance went to the weaver as payment for manufacturing a piece of cloth. Weavers spent much of this on food and other necessities for themselves and their families, but a small amount was used for the maintenance of looms and tools. The loom strings, which had to be replaced every two months, represented the costliest item of maintenance.¹⁷ The remainder of the advance was used

to purchase materials. Of these, yarn was the major expense, but small sums were also needed to purchase pieces of cloth and small quantities of rice and oil for sizing the warp. While the weavers worked his loom, his wife and children were typically hard at work preparing the yarn for the next piece. Weavers who had small families had to hire labourers (“coolies”) to do this preparatory work, which reduced the income of the weaver and his household. This led a late 18th century Company servant to remark that large families yielded higher incomes for weavers.¹⁸ In the year 1768 weavers who produced ordinary varieties of longcloth earned two pagodas a month, a sum which could purchase about 250 pounds of rice.¹⁹

Till the first half of the eighteenth century, the relations between the European trading Companies and local weavers and merchants continued to be harmonious and mutually beneficial. A large number of looms continued to be busy in manufacturing cloth for export. During the second quarter of the 18th century, the factories of the English East India Company based at Madras, and Cuddalore continued to increase their investments and supplies of textiles. The authority of the Company penetrated deep into the hinterland and now it started dealing directly with the weavers and succeeded in eliminating the merchant middlemen by appointing its own agents or *dubashis*.²⁰ The Company also attempted to obtain yarn from other places as a result of which the importance of local weavers was reduced considerably. Further, the Company not only reduced the wages of the weavers, it also disallowed them from working for other European Companies which were prepared to pay higher wages. The English even forced the weavers to work on credit and payments were made at their convenience.²¹ The price of the cloth fixed by the company’s clerks was far below the market price.

Imposition of various types of taxes and high custom rates had an adverse effect on the weaving community and textile production. Unfavourable conditions like unemployment and famines were best exploited by the company and the advances were paid back partly in copper and partly in their own broad cloth.²²

By the close of the 18th century, the English East India Company became supreme on the Coromandel Coast as the Dutch had virtually lost all their privileges and trade. The English continued with their policy of oppressive assessment of revenue and imposition of restrictions which made the weavers desert his loom and emigrate from the *havelis* and Zamindaris in search of alternative employment or to take to the plough.²³ Under the Company's commercial policy duties were enhanced resulting in the further reduction of the volume of cotton textiles exports from the region. Till the beginning of the 19th century, Cuddalore exported *chintzs* and coloured cloths alone worth of 2 lakhs rupees. J.S. Mill rightly criticized the British policy of using or misusing their political power to secure undue profits to the English textile industry at the expense of the indigenous textile industry. Among the textile products exported from the Coromandel Coast to the South East Asian countries, the most important items were *Salempuris* and *muris* of fine to coarser quality in many colours.²⁴ The next item of export was *muri*, both of finer and coarser quality. The chint made out of *muri*, was in great demand in the Southeast Asian markets.²⁵

The activities of the major cloth purchasers also support such an impressionistic picture of the market. The Dutch also purchased fine quality muslins from Arni and other weaving villages in the Company's Jagir. Also indicative of the continued and serious Dutch interest in the cloth trade, officials of the Dutch East India Company lodged many

protests over English interference in the cloth market. The Danish, Portuguese and Ostender Companies also purchased cloth in South Arcot district.²⁶ Private traders were also major buyers of cloth in the final decades of the eighteenth century. Holden Furber and others have documented the activities of European traders well.²⁷ Far less is known about the trade of Asian merchants who continued to control a major share of cloth Exports from South India. In 1768 the Cuddalore Council estimated that private Asian traders annually exported substantial quantities of cloth (2 to 2 ½ lakhs of Pagodas was its estimate) from Porto Novo to Aceh and Kedah.²⁸

Production Conditions

The Company's first forms into the production lives of weavers took place in Cuddalore in 1772 four years after direct advances had been instituted. The Company believed that in this period there had been little improvement in the cloth because weavers did not purchase yarn of the proper quality. To ensure that weavers used good yarn, the Company appointed sorters who were to inspect the yarn before the weaver fitted it to their looms. Such inspection proved to be time-consuming and difficult, however, which led the company to take responsibility for the purchase of the yarn itself. Instead of advancing money to weavers, the company began to advance yarn along with a small amount of cash; three-fourths of the value of the advance was yarn and one-fourth money.²⁹ The decline in weavers power at the close of the eighteenth century was a result of the social and political changes which accompanied the rise of British rule in South India. Therefore the powerful position of weavers was due not simply to the market but to the social political orders in pre-colonial South India.³⁰ Early nineteenth century, the Committee of Reform reported that the weaver derived no gain by working

for the Company, but had to supplement the meager earnings thus obtained by producing coarse fabrics for sale in the market to maintain his family.³¹

The first half nineteenth centuries weaving industry was declined. The Company had put heavy tax on loom and additional taxation on weavers; they were not able to pay tax. The weavers turned their professional for seeking on agricultural production. Good and sympathetic officers like Weston, Master Attendant at Cuddalore were in favour of removing additional taxes so as to enable the Indian weavers to “enter into more equal competition in the market with those from the United Kingdom”.³² The Board, which did not want to lose its revenue, turned down the suggestion.³³ In 1824 the Board of Trade was abolished and with it many factories of the Company were closed. But the Board of Revenue was very optimistic and was of view that “whatever temporary inconvenience might be experienced by the weavers we do not apprehend any serious or permanent injury to the prosperity of the district from the abolition of the factories”.³⁴ The Board of Revenue was wrong in its estimate. The weavers in almost all districts were affected by the closure of factories which “inflicted a fearful blow” on them. Many of them, out of despair and disappointment migrated to Sri Lanka, Burma and Mauritius.³⁵

The controversy about the fate of the traditional textile industry of India under the impact of cheap machine made textile imports from Great Britain in the nineteenth century. Textile imports only covered the increase of demand for cotton textiles on the Indian market and that the import of cheap machine-made yarn strengthened the competitive power of the Indian weavers vis-a-vis the import.³⁶ The developments prior to 1850 were of special interest so far as this period witnessed the first entry of textile imports and, in particular, a sharp reduction in their prices. Konrad Specker, in his

statistical data shows on the number of looms were worked in the Madras Presidency from 1819-20 to 1834-44. According to his statistical data the number of looms fluctuated year by year which point to a relatively high degree of susceptibility of the traditional textile sector to economic crises of short duration.³⁷

Number of looms in South Arcot 1821-22 to 1830-31 and 1841-42 to 1843-44

Year	Looms	Year	Looms
1821-22	8500	1828-29	10100
1822-23	8700	1829-30	10200
1823-24	8400	1830-31	9700
1824-25	6400	1840-41	11700
1825-26	6700	1841-42	11800
1826-27	9300	1842-43	12100
1827-28	9700	1843-44	11000

Note: The numbers of loom are not indicative for the production capacity and for the degree of operational use of the looms.

Source: Letters from Collector of South Arcot district to Board of Revenue dated 10th October 1833, Board of Revenue 22nd October 1833, IOR R/299/11, and 30th July 1844, BPR 5.8.1844, IOR R/305/16, p.10200, cited in Konrad Specker, 'Madras handlooms in the nineteenth century', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 26, No.2 (1989), p.135.

The people of South Arcot were the victims of three main periods of famine in the first half of the century. However, the effects of these famines on the growth of the number of looms were of varying magnitude.³⁸ According to above the table, the number of looms in 1821-22 was 8500; it increased to 8700 in 1822-24. In the 1823-24 and 1824-25 the number of looms was decreased to 8400 and 6400, due to famine. From 1826-27

to 1829-30 the number of looms was continuously increased to 10,200, as a consequence of favourable demand, again it increased to 1,21,100 in the year 1842-43.

The largest portion of the traditional textile production was based in rural areas. According to Konrad Specker, in his statistical data shows overall wide increase in the number of looms in Madras Presidency.³⁹ In Tamil Nadu particularly the districts of North Arcot, South Arcot, Thanjavur recorded a decreased between the end of the 1850s and 1870.⁴⁰ In South Arcot district in the year between 1856-57 and 1860-61 the average number of looms (both urban and rural areas) was 12,882 and the number of looms at work in 1869-70 was 9,493 (urban 3,414 and rural 6,079). The number of looms was decreased to 3,389.⁴¹ The declining trend till 1870 was especially marked in South Arcot, which was largely attributable to the increase in the price of raw cotton in the 1860s and to the inflow of imports from England.⁴² In South Arcot the number of looms decreased by a quarter. The Collector particularly drew attention to the regional differences within the district. Two conflicting trends were noticeable, one towards a relative decentralization of production and the other towards relative centralization. This apparent contradiction once again points to the fact that the course of the development was closely determined by the type of cloth produced and that certain centres could hold out. But, on the whole, the textile industry in this district recorded a sharply retrograde tendency and innumerable weavers started to turn to agricultural pursuits.⁴³

The exact relationship between agricultural and textile prices varied according to product and region. Nevertheless, the bulk of the weavers' expenditure went towards food. The closer the relationship between agricultural prices and the position of the weavers, however, the more devastating was the effect of the gap between agricultural

and textile prices during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ In the later part of the nineteenth century things changed rapidly from bad to worse. In addition to foreign machine made goods, frequent famines wrought untold havoc to the weavers. The sad plight of them had compelled the Government of Madras to Institute an inquiry to assess the condition of weavers in detail. The Board which conducted inquires twice, one in 1871 and the other in 1890 came to the conclusion that the chief cause of the decline of the industry was the competition with the mill industry.⁴⁵

The fact that Britishers with their knowledge of advanced machine and a vested interest, emboldened themselves to bypass the age-old weaving traditions of South Arcot, was undisputable. Weavers were endless subjected to exploitation by all means. As a result, the ancient hand-spinning industry almost died out, making the hand weaver helplessly dependent on the machine for supply of yarn. The tariff policy during 1896-1914 favoured the progress of handloom industry in Tamil Nadu. Between 1914 and 1920 the number of power looms increased. Production of handloom cloth also sharply fell during this period. The situation resulted in unemployment for weavers. During war period import of cloth was reduced and internal demand was increased, which became helpful for mills. Till about middle of the 19th century, textile industry in South Arcot meant handloom industry only, handloom cloth circulation in the district and a flourishing export market in addition. But situation changed so rapidly that before the Second World War the ratio was in favour of the mill sector not in favour of the handlooms.⁴⁶

In the early part of 1930s the condition of weavers was precarious. Government of India was not paying and attention. Only the State Government was trying to help the weavers. Gradually the state government realized the urgency of the situation. Government of India also felt that weavers were hit by the import duty of the yarn. Then a grant was released to the industry equivalent to proceeds of an import duty of one-fourth anna per pound of imported yarn upto the fifties. It was included for the first time in the budget of 1935.⁴⁷ However, financial measure were not sufficient to ameliorate difficult conditions faced by weavers. Therefore, a Fact Finding Committee was appointed in 1941 to investigate different problems of the country, such as difficulty in getting yarn, marketing of finished products, state of handloom technique, etc. It had responsibility also to findout a new way of reorganized the industry and demarcating a special field for handloom. The All India Handloom Board was setup in 1945 according to the recommendation of the committee and it was again revitalized in 1952.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Weavers were a powerful group in eighteenth century South India. Nevertheless, they were vulnerable to the integration of political and economic power. Thus the integration of political and economic power alone does not fully account for the effects of the Company's political authority on weavers above the period. In the second half of the seventeenth century the handloom production was attracted European Companies. They had relationship with weavers and merchants in every village for producing cloth for textile trade. The English East India Company developed the textile trade for marketing. In the late eighteenth century the number of looms reduced, because of the weavers had not enough money to purchase yarn. In the second half of the nineteenth century the

powerloom competition the handloom weavers find that they are compelled to be dependent on the market for yarn, and even for dyes, since vegetables dyes have rapidly gone out of fashion and chemical dyes provide a wider range of colours. They were indebted to the master weavers, the village money-lenders or merchants, and these continue to get the major share of profits from the sale of handlooms. Before independence many handloom weavers organized themselves into co-operative societies. Madras, with the highest number of handlooms and producing many exports varieties, was the first state to build up a co-operative organization among handloom weavers, even before the Second World War. However, these societies have been only partially successful in solving the difficulties of handloom weavers. They have been ineffective in combating private merchants and middlemen and the master weavers. Even after the inception of textile mills and factories in England, Indian fabrics were so cheap that the British trade found itself threatened with extinction. The existence of British textile was in jeopardy; the parliament decreed drastic reduction in the import of Indian cloth and levied more duty on it. But the still the Indian textile products were found to be cheaper. Thereupon more rigorous measures were adopted to discourage the use of Indian cloth. Punishment was reinforced on Indian tradesmen and Englishmen who wore Indian cloths. The above accounts testify to the international reputation of Indian handloom fabrics in olden times. But later on, during the British rule in India and the influence of both World Wars, the vitality of the handloom industry was greatly diminished.

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